

To: Smith, Bonnie[smith.bonnie@epa.gov]
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Spill Lesson: "Protecting Clean Water Is Not a Luxury"

Dan Heyman, Public News Service-WV

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(01/13/14) CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Many West Virginians have decided that the lesson from the Freedom Industries chemical spill is to better protect their water from pollution. For years, the state has seen legal and political battles between industries and citizen groups over clean water rules.

While waiting in line for bottled water this weekend, Marilyn McGeorge of Charleston said she believes the accident showed clear signs of widespread negligence - not just by the company, but by regulators as well.

"The Department of Environmental Protection should have been aware that with that tank poised above the water supply, this was something that could happen very easily," McGeorge said.

According to Angie Rosser, executive director, West Virginia Rivers Coalition, people tend to regard environmental and water quality rules as luxuries - something that can be bent to allow economic development. She said that is proving to be dangerous.

"Protecting the environment is really protecting our quality of life. We just had the 40th anniversary of the Clean Water Act. Yet we still, every day, permit industries to pollute directly into our drinking water sources," Rosser pointed out.

The accident shows that the regulatory attitude needs to change, she added.

"Clean water is essential for life. This kind of a harmful, toxic chemical, with such close proximity to a drinking water source for over 300,000 West Virginians, is just unacceptable," she said.

In the past, state officials have described water protections as sufficient, or even excessive. McGeorge said the accident should also make people think differently about cases in which local residents have had their well water polluted by coal mining or natural gas fracking.

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